

Grade Level Change Amendment Request

Purpose: To request an amendment to the charter contract to increase or decrease the number of grades served.

Submission Deadline: The PEC must approve the requested amendment before the school may implement the change. Complete amendment requests that are submitted 28 days prior to the next PEC meeting will be placed on the next agenda.

PEC Direction and Information Required for Each Type of Grade level: The PEC differentiates between three different types of grade level amendments requests and for schools performing in the bottom 25% of schools, will look closely at the ability of the school to improve outcomes for existing students prior to approving a grade level change.

A. School Success.

Data demonstrating that the school's educational model and organizational structure is working and is effective at the school:

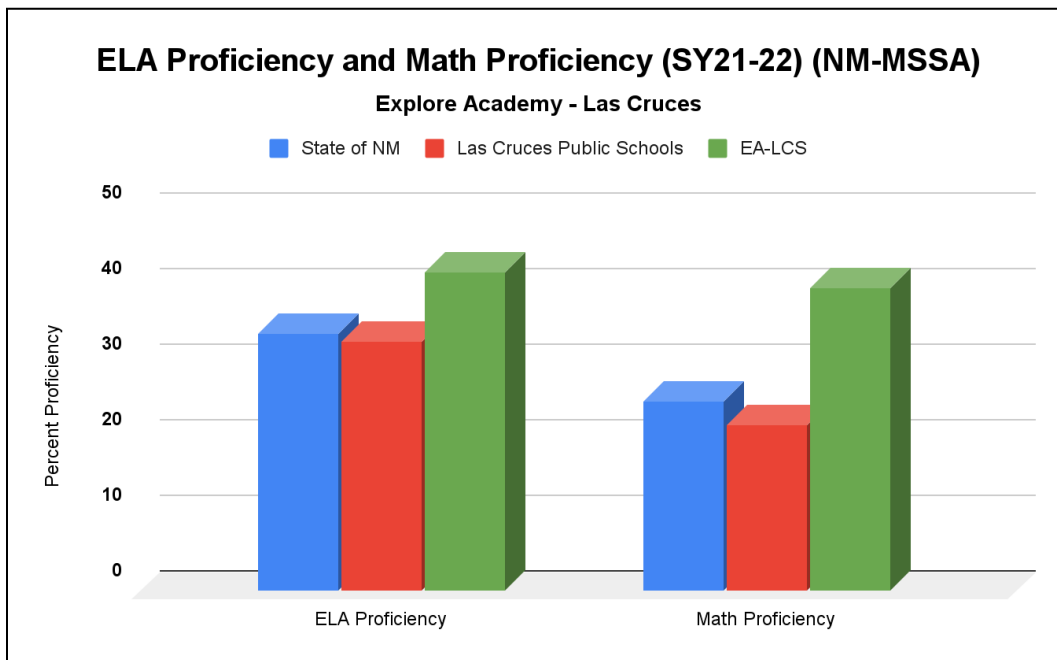
1. **Academic and organizational success in implementing the existing charter; OR**
2. **If the school has had academic or organizational challenges, describe what exceptional circumstances exist that would show that the change is in the best interest of the students.**

Explore Academy - Las Cruces opened its doors at a time when students were returning to the classroom after over a year in virtual learning settings. As a young charter school with a proficiency-based model, we knew that the best way to serve our students was to measure their current levels of proficiency and work to close the learning gaps in all content areas. Using data from the iMSSA interim assessment and from common standards-aligned exit exams, we identified areas of need and adjusted our efforts to support students as they maneuvered their transition back into the classroom. The Explore learning model is based on student choice, accountability, and support, so we focused our efforts on holding students accountable for their learning while providing each student with the focused and personal support they needed to make growth in core content areas while also fostering healthy social skills and community building after so much time in isolation the previous school year. Academically, students entered Explore Academy - Las Cruces with very low levels of proficiency based on their previous school records and on iMSSA interim assessment data from fall 2021. We knew it was crucial to close the learning gaps from their K-5 and/or early middle school years and prepare them for the demands of high school and beyond.

While understanding the academic data and learning gaps students are facing, Explore's learning model uses engagement and support to achieve student academic growth. Our inaugural course catalog provided students and their families with a new outlook on middle school - one in which students were in the driver's seat and could steer themselves towards the educational path that most inspired them. Most students were entirely new to formative grading and to proficiency-based assessments, so the first year of operation was filled with "falling forward" as students, and teachers, learned to take risks, make mistakes, and push themselves toward higher levels of thinking and learning. In semester two, students were able to give input to teachers about their class "flavors", the class themes we use at Explore, and as a result the teachers were able to offer even more engaging content to students in the second half of the year. When students had higher levels of engagement, they were able to achieve increasingly higher levels of proficiency.

As a result of our academic model and efforts, the students of Explore Academy - Las Cruces achieved higher levels of academic proficiency on the NM-MSSA ELA and math assessment than both Las Cruces Public Schools (LCS) and the state of New Mexico averages. We attribute this success to our standards- and proficiency-based model that holds students to a high standard of

accountability while providing the support and engagement necessary to reach rigorous academic goals and outcomes. The table below shows the comparison between Explore Academy - Las Cruces, LCPS, and State achievement averages on the NM-MSSA from spring 2022.



Explore Academy - Las Cruces solicits feedback from all stakeholders on a quarterly basis to obtain relevant and helpful feedback. Middle school parents are asked to rate responses on a scale of 1.0 - 5.0. As seen in the table below, the results from Q1 and Q2 for 2022-2023 indicate that parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with their students' experiences at Explore Academy.

Parent Survey Results	QTR 1	QTR 2
Teachers provides instruction that is engaging to students	4.25	4.52
My student enjoys EA	4.40	4.65
Teachers are supportive and provide individualized attention	4.40	4.60
My student feels safe and respected	4.20	4.52
School has a positive culture	4.20	4.40
My student is appropriately challenged	4.15	4.65
Comprehensive and Informative Communication	4.52	4.53
MEAN	4.30	4.55

The DRAFT 2021-2022 Annual Report for Explore Academy - Las Cruces was apparently sent on February 10, 2023 to the Head Administrator and includes the following chart regarding the performance framework ratings:

Explore Academy – Las Cruces	2021-22
Academic Performance	
1 State Accountability System	Pending
2 Subgroup Performance	Pending
3 Mission-Specific Goals	Exceeds Standard
Organizational and Financial Performance	
1a Mission and Educational Program	Meets Standard
1b State Assessment Requirements	Working to Meet Standard
1c Rights of Students with Disabilities	Meets Standard
1d Rights of English Learners	Meets Standard
1e Meeting Program Requirements	Meets Standard
1f NM DASH Plan	N/A
2a Financial Reporting and Compliance	N/A
2b Accounting Principles	N/A
2c Responsive to Audit Findings	N/A
2d Managing Grant Funds	Meets Standard
2e Staffing for Fiscal Management	Meets Standard
2f Internal Controls	N/A
3a Governance Requirements	Meets Standard
3b Nepotism, Conflict of Interest	Meets Standard
3c Reporting Requirements	Meets Standard
4a Rights of All Students	Meets Standard
4b Attendance and Retention	Working to Meet Standard
4c Staff Credentialing	Meets Standard
4d Employee Rights	Meets Standard
4e Background Checks, Ethics	Meets Standard
5a Facilities	Meets Standard
5b Transportation	Meets Standard
5c Health and Safety	Meets Standard
5d Handling Information	Meets Standard

Please note that, the justification for the “working to meet standard” rating for **Indicator 1b State Assessment Requirements** was "ELA participation 93%, math 94%, science 92% Target is 95% for all assessments." However, there are errors in these calculations. 100% of the students enrolled at Explore Academy - Las Cruces during the testing window took the reading and math assessments and all but one 8th grader took the science test. The PED first reported 94% took ELA, 94% Math, and 92% Science; then later revised the percentages to 97% ELA, 97% Math, and 96% Science. **This should be Meets Standard.**

The only other “working to meet standard” rating was for Indicator 4b ‘Does the school meet *attendance, retention and recurrent enrollment goals* for the students?’ The reason is due to the fact that the attendance rate was 93% (short of the 95% target). Though this may be correct, this was during the school’s first year of operations, during a time when the impact of the pandemic was ongoing. In addition, the retention and recurrent enrollment rates were not provided in the report and are excellent: .

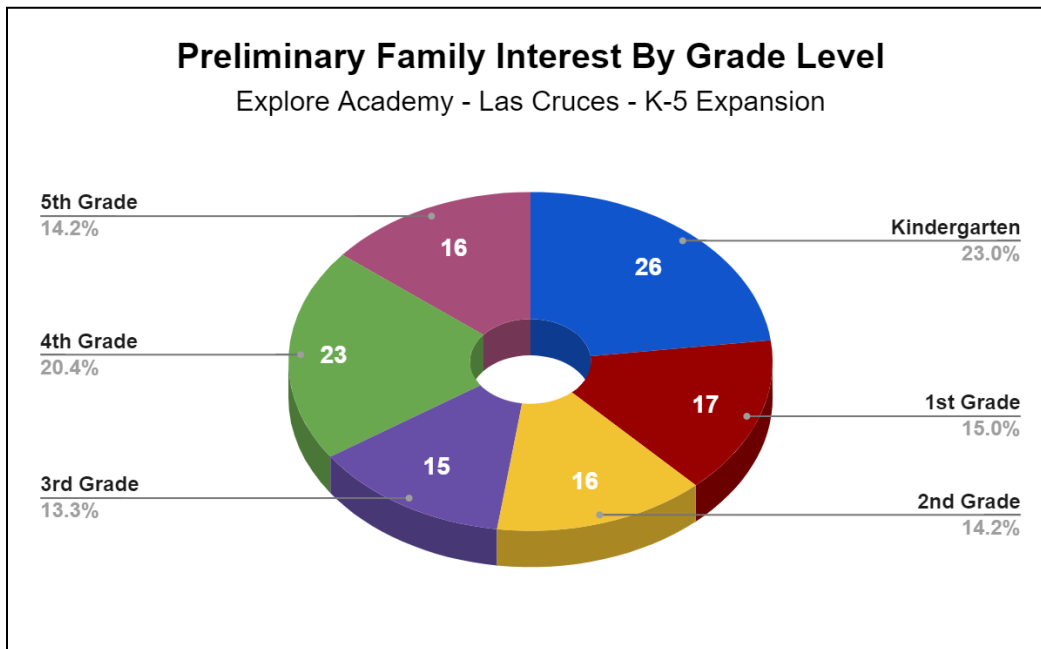
- Retention ratings during the school year were not available at the time of the preliminary site visit report but are now available and the school retained 84.16% (above the target of 80%);
- Recurrent enrollment is not in effect until the second year and not included until the second annual report; However, in 2022-2023, 86.05% of students returned to the school (well above the target of 70%); and
- Attendance was 93% (short of the 95% target).

B. Need for the change in the community and school.

Data demonstrating support for expanded/reduced grades in the community and results from a community input meeting held by the Governing Board of the school at a public meeting:

1. Results of a community input meeting held by the Governing Board of the school at a public meeting; AND Other information showing community support
2. Data or information showing need for the grade-level change, such as:
 - a. Demonstration of parent demand for the amendment request;
 - b. Identified need in the community for the grade-level change (e.g., students coming into the school without sufficient skills);
 - c. Change needed to address an operational concern (e.g., fiscal challenge related to the school size resulting from the funding formula as applied to the charter)

Families have come forth with strong interest in the school implementing a K-5 program. In gathering data on perspective families, and to demonstrate community support and parent demand, the following interest (113 interested students in all) has been collected from families who would enroll their student at Explore Academy for the grade levels in question:

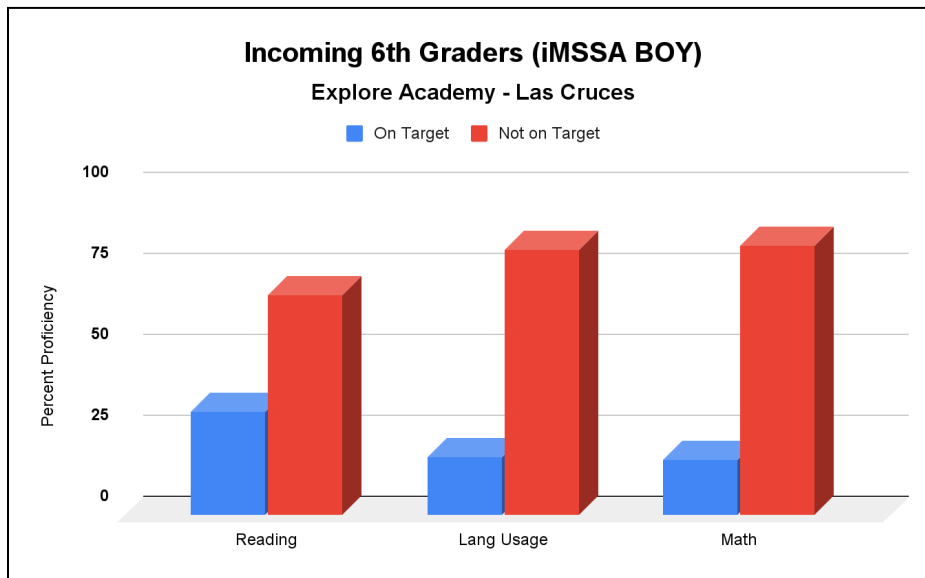


At the school’s community input hearing, which took place at the February 22, 2023 governing council meeting, there were over thirty attendees who advocated for the expansion to grades K-5, with several making public comments in strong support for this additional education option for students of Las Cruces.

There is a strong need for the addition of a K-5 option for charter schools in Las Cruces. Currently, there exist two options for K-5 programming in Las Cruces, with one of the aforementioned schools offering K-5 for 2023-24 (Raices del Saber Xinachtli Community School). The other, J Paul Taylor Academy, is a well-established K-8 school in the area that has an exceptional waiting list of students for grades K-5, thus demonstrating the strong demand for school options at those grade levels.

Over the two years of enrollment of 6th graders, incoming students have shown to be largely off-target in the three measured areas according to the beginning-of-year interim testing. This shows a need for stronger elementary programs to provide greater academic readiness for

transitioning to 6th grade.



Regarding operational changes, the school's facility and administration are prepared to cope with the addition of a K-5 program. For a potential soft launch in the fall of 2023, the school's facility is equipped to handle a shift to partially house students in K-5 with adequate separation from its existing 6-10 population. For future expansion, the school is negotiating, pending PEC approval, for the long-term use of a nearby site to split the K-5 students from those in grades 6-12 while still maintaining shared use of bus transportation. (If/when that is finalized, the school will submit the appropriate amendment request for school relocation and/or additional square footage.)

C. *Data/research showing effectiveness of the change.*

Effectiveness shown through data or research demonstrating that the school's educational model will be effective in the new grades and educational level, or examples of successful schools serving similar grades using the school's educational model in the proposed grades.

The K-5 educational model is derived from the 6-12 model and maintains a similar focus on thematic instruction, active, seminar-style classes, and standards-based teaching and assessment. This model has been implemented at all six grade levels (K-5) of expansion since August 2021 at Explore Academy Elementary in Albuquerque. The student population was 322 in SY 2021-22 and is 379 in SY 2022-23.

Academic data from the first year of K-5 indicated strong performance, well above the statewide average and peer districts in Albuquerque and Rio Rancho (see chart below). These academic outcomes are particularly notable given the large N size and the interruption in schooling during the pandemic, as well as during the school's first year of operation with ongoing pandemic impacts.

Achievement Results 2022

	3-5 NM MSSA ELA % proficient + advanced	K-2 Istation % proficient + advanced	3-5 NM MSSA Math % proficient + advanced	5th grade ASR Science % proficient + advanced	3-5 NM MSSA ELA difference	K-2 Istation Early lit difference	3-5 NM MSSA Math difference	5th grade ASR Science difference
Explore	62	34	48	62				
Statewide	34	27	25	43	28 pts higher	7 pts higher	23 pts higher	19 pts higher
APS	36	25	25	34	26 pts higher	9 pts higher	23 pts higher	28 pts higher
Rio Rancho	45	34	37	51	17 pts higher	equal	11 pts higher	11 pts higher

Further analysis of student performance on the state's end of year summative assessment revealed a large proportion of students performing at the advanced level, indicating the highest level of mastery of the state's standards.

- Language Arts
 - 22% of third graders
 - 41% of fourth graders
 - 37% of fifth graders
- Mathematics
 - 2% of third graders
 - 14% of fourth graders
 - 23% of fifth graders
- Science
 - 25% of fifth graders

This end-of-year summative assessment data is validated by interim assessment growth measures. In SY 2021-22, students at Explore Academy Elementary took the i-Ready interim assessment three times (September, December, May) in grades K-5 mathematics and grades 3-5 ELA. Kindergarten through second grade students took Istation three times as required through the state. Those data are reflected in the summative charts above.

Analysis of student growth over the course of one school year revealed substantial progress. The school observed the following increases in the percentage of students scoring at levels 4 or 5 (proficient or advanced) from beginning of year in September 2021 to end of year in May of 2022:

Language Arts

- 24% for third grade students
- 14% for fourth grade students
- 5% for fifth grade students

Mathematics

- 27% for kindergarten students
- 43% for first grade students
- 19% for second grade students
- 31% for third grade students
- 31% for fourth grade students
- 16% for fifth grade students

D. *Preparation for implementation.*

A full narrative showing that the school is prepared for implementation, including How will the school address the challenges of the new grades including the potential impact on staffing, facilities and other areas? (e.g., Does grade level increase require different licensure requirements and if so how will school accommodate? Is the facility sufficient to accommodate the additional grade levels.)

Narrative should address impact of proposed changes (needed for enrollment cap increase) Concise narrative addressing how the proposed changes may affect: (1) staffing; (2) enrollment targets; (3) advertising and marketing; (4) the curriculum, assessment and instruction; (5) resources and budget; (6) the community; and (7) the capacity of the facility.

(1) Impact to staffing

There will be no impact to existing staff. However, adding grades K-5 will require immediate recruitment and hiring of additional teachers licensed to teach those grade levels, as well as more Educational Assistants. The school has been very successful via postings on Indeed, applications on the school's website, and referrals from current staff and does not foresee any issues.

(2) Impact to enrollment targets

Enrollment targets and overall enrollment cap should be increased to accommodate the additional students in grades K-5. An amendment request for enrollment cap increase will be submitted simultaneously with this request for serving additional grade levels.

(3) Impact to advertising and marketing

The school's leadership team is responding to requests from the community and, therefore, do not anticipate any issues. The school has been soliciting interest from families, both via its website, social media, through existing families, and via in-person events (such as meet-and-greets at the school and virtually and the local charter school fair in Las Cruces). If approved for grades K-5, direct mailing and other methods, including those listed above, will be used to communicate which grades are open for lottery and enrollment.

(4) Impact to the curriculum, assessment and instruction

A K-5 scope and sequence encompassing the NM CCSS for ELA, mathematics, NM and NGSS science, and the new NM social studies standards exists and has been piloted at Explore Academy Elementary. The ELA, math, and science scope and sequence have already been revised through a series of focus groups and data reflections to meet the needs of students post-pandemic. The new social studies standards have been implemented fully during SY 22-23 and the scope and sequence will be revised in response to teacher feedback following the first year of implementation.

As the grades in Las Cruces expand down from 4-5 to K-5, teachers hired will have the opportunity to review, adjust, and adapt this existing scope and sequence to meet the needs of students in Las Cruces. Like teachers at the secondary (6-12) level, Las Cruces elementary teachers will design their own flavors, thematic units of study that embody the standards taught within. Teachers are encouraged to design seminars that are reflective of the community and students they serve. The power and possibility is open to teachers to use their creativity and knowledge of their community, families, students, and local culture to conceive and develop relevant, exciting flavors, allowing students to see themselves reflected back in their learning experiences and the school's educators and other staff members. The goal is to design a curriculum that is not only aligned to the required standards, but also integrates the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students.

Formative core assessments will be created from freely available Cognia item sets aligned with the NM CCSS and the sets of standards taught in each seminar. Students will take all required state assessments, including NM MSSA and ASR. Students in grade 4 and 5 will also take the Istation interim assessment in reading and math three times per year.

Prior to the start of the school year and ongoing through the year, teachers will be provided substantial professional development in the model, including flavored instruction, standards-based planning, and seminar-style, student-centered classrooms with active, hands-on learning and discussion. Teachers will have supported work time and on-demand technical assistance as they gather and plan using materials, content, concepts, and tasks for each seminar in a way that incorporates the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and the community. School instructional coaches and leaders will ensure that curriculum recognizes and teaches Black, Native American, and Hispanic culture and history, and provides students space and time to reflect on their own identities, lifeways, and linguistic assets.

(5) Impact to resources and budget

This change will require changes to the school's projected budgets over the final years of its charter. The school anticipates the utilization of growth funding through its SEG as reported on its 910b5 to offset the needed revenue to support a launch of new grade levels until per-pupil funding begins to kick in for each subsequent school year. The school plans to apply for CSP funding for the expansion subgrant which will further assist in the purchasing of materials, supplies, and equipment to support the proposed expansion.

Regarding staffing as a resource, the school plans to support this expansion effort with the appropriate staffing in accordance with the requirements for K-5 classrooms and support staff and for the full implementation of the Explore Academy K-5 model. The school recognizes this challenge with the current funding formula and plans to, as described above, utilize the growth funding as calculated through the 910b5 to support the necessary staffing structures that need to be in place.

(6) Impact to the Community

As this request is in response to community need and request from students and families in Las Cruces, the approval of adding grades K-5 will be well-received. Approval would be exciting news to those families seeking a high quality educational option for their children.

Additionally, the school offers both food service (including NSLP participation) and bus transportation, making it an accessible option for any student in the city of Las Cruces.

(7) Impact to the capacity of the facility

As mentioned above, the school's facility is equipped to handle a shift to partially house students in K-5 with adequate separation from its existing 6-10 population. For future expansion, the school is negotiating, pending PEC approval, for the long-term use of a nearby site to split the K-5 students from those in grades 6-12 while still maintaining shared use of bus transportation.

At this time, there is no additional facility for this request. However, the Governing Board has approved and attached the assurances that the school will not occupy any space until the school possesses a Certificate of Occupancy, provides a copy of the Certificate of Occupancy to the CSD within 30-days of occupancy, and will not occupy any space that does not meet the ownership and leasing requirements of Section 22-8B-4.2 NMSA 1978. Additionally, if/when an agreement with another facility is finalized, the school will submit the appropriate amendment request for school relocation and/or additional square footage which will include all required documentation such as the letter from Public School Facilities Authority (PSFA) with the New Mexico Condition Index (NMCI), lease, building capacity, etc.

E. *Rationale for timing of the request.*

Note: A school should have implemented full operational capacity of all grades as identified in its charter contract before seeking a significant grade level increase. If the school has not fully implemented the plan identified in the charter contract, the school should identify why the change is needed now. If the school has been in operation for less than three years, the school should explain why the requested change was not made in the original charter application.

As indicated above, the school has prepared this amendment request in response to community interest and requests from parents to offer elementary grades, using the Explore model, in Las Cruces. Though there are several charter schools located in Las Cruces, only two offer grades K-5 and one of those has approximately 175 students on their waitlist each year.

Explore Academy - Las Cruces is in its second year of operations. The original charter application did not include grades K-5 because when the founding team was preparing the application, the data indicated that parents and the community were seeking education options for middle and high school students. Additionally, there was, at that time, no data to support the success of elementary schools that have implemented the Explore learning model.

The landscape has changed and, therefore, the school respectfully submits this amendment request in hopes of meeting the community need.

Data provided by CSD:

CSD will

- provide PEC with performance data (academic, organizational, and financial) for the contract term from annual reports, and including any outstanding compliance or investigations, and
- highlight information relevant to the amendment request.

Data and Information provided by the School:

Simple and Significant Grade Level Changes

X Fully completed form

X Approved board minutes or certification of the vote taken by the board - *The board had approved this change previously but reconsideration and vote was taken after the community input hearing on February 22, 2023.*

If an additional facility will be utilized

NOT APPLICABLE AT THIS TIME; However, assurances by the Governing Board are attached.

Attach the following information for the new facility or current facility expansion a(n):

- Certificate of Occupancy, approved for educational use; OR an assurance that the school will not occupy any space until the school possesses a Certificate of Occupancy and an assurance that a copy of the Certificate of Occupancy will be provided to the CSD within a 30-days of occupancy;
- Letter from PSFA stating that the facility meets the NMCI;
- Documentation of the capacity load of the existing or new facility to document capacity that can sustain the enrollment increase; and
 - An assurance that the school will not occupy any space that does not meet the ownership and leasing requirements of Section 22-8B-4.2 NMSA 1978

If the school is also requesting an enrollment cap increase.

X Submit an enrollment cap amendment form.

Contact charter.schools@ped.nm.gov if you have questions about completing or submitting documents.